

THE POWER OF NEGATIVE THINKING

Words to the Cross - 2

"And he said, "Jesus remember me when you come in your kingly power." Luke 23:42

IN THE PAST TEN YEARS OR SO WE HAVE HEARD MUCH ABOUT THE POWER OF POSITIVE
THINKING. NORMAN VINCENT PEALE HAS MADE A WIDELY ACCLAIMED NAME FOR HIMSELF ~~AND A~~
~~PILE OF MONEY TO BOOT BY ALLOWING A PSYCHOLOGICAL TECHNIQUE TO REPLACE THE FUNDAMENTAL~~ *USING CONQUER MYRIAD of prob*
MOTIF OF CHRISTIANITY. POSITIVE THINKING HAS BEEN RECOMMENDED TO CURE ARTHRITIS,
TO PASS EXAMINATIONS, TO RUN A FOUR MINUTE MILE AND TO BRING SUCCESS IN THE BUSINESS
WORLD. MR. PEALE HAS PUBLISHED BOOK AFTER BOOK AND ANSWERED A MYRIAD OF QUESTIONS
FROM DOWN HEARTED SOULS: THE RESULT BEING THAT FOR HIS DEVOTEES THERE IS NO OTHER
WAY OF THINKING BUT POSITIVE THINKING.

THERE IS MUCH TO BE SAID FOR POSITIVE THINKING, EVERY MINISTER, TEACHER,
COUNSELOR, PSYCHIATRIST, ANYONE WHOSE BUSINESS IS PEOPLE KNOWS THAT ONE ~~EXPERIENCE~~
~~NEEDS~~ OF THE THINGS MOST LACKING IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY IS SELF
CONFIDENCE AND ASSURANCE. AS SUCH, POSITIVE THINKING IS FINE, A COMMENDABLE ENDEA-
VOR. BUT WHEN IT REPLACES, AND IT HAS DONE THIS THE BASIC CHRISTIAN IDEA THAT I
HAVE CALLED NEGATIVE THINKING, IT'S FAR OUT OF PLACE. I HAVE HEARD A CIRCLE IN
A FAIRLY SHORT TIME ON THE SUBJECT IN THE PAST AND I WILL
PASS IT ON TO YOU. "PAUL IS APPEALING BUT PEALE IS APPALING."

AGAIN, LET ME SAY THAT POSITIVE THINKING IS A NECESSITY, A BADLY NEEDED ENDEAVOR FOR MOST OF US, UNTIL IT REPLACES CHRISTIANITY.

look at a man whose reaction to J.C.
AND SO I WOULD LIKE TO TURN TO THE SECOND WORD TO THE CROSS, A WORD THAT

EPITOMIZES THE POWER OF NEGATIVE THINKING ~~THE WORD OF~~ THE THIEF WHO SUFFERED
BESIDE OUR LORD AND FOUND LIFE AS HE DIED.

NOT A STRANGE POSITION
JESUS WAS CRUCIFIED BETWEEN TWO THIEVES. IT WAS ~~HIS TRUE POSITION, WHERE HE~~
FOR HIM
ALWAYS WANTED TO BE. DURING HIS LIFE HE WAS CONSTANTLY ACCUSED OF EATING AND
DRINKING ~~WITH SINNERS~~ WITH SINNERS, OF ENTERING UNCLEAN HOUSEHOLDS, OF ASSOCIATING
WITH SOCIALLY UNDESIRABLES. NOW HE ~~CAN~~ *COULD* BE ACCUSED OF DYING WITH THESE SAME PEOPLE.
ACTUALLY, HE HAD LITTLE IN COMMON WITH THE TWO THIEVES EXCEPT A COMMON WAY OF
DYING. ~~IT WAS AS THE DARKNESS DEFERED AT NOON ON THAT ROCKY MOUND CALLED GOLGOTHA~~
~~THAT THE THREE WERE CRUCIFIED TOGETHER~~. ROME AND THE JEWISH SANHEDRIN HAD KNOWN
WHAT TO DO WITH THE TWO THIEVES, BUT FOR JESUS' SO CALLED OFFENSES THERE WERE NO
LAWS, NO ESTABLISHED PUNISHMENT. AS A MATTER OF EXPEDIENCY HE WAS CRUCIFIED AT THE
SAME TIME AS A SCHEDULED EXECUTION IN HOPES THAT HE WOULD GO UN-noticed.

THE TWO THIEVES MAY OR MAY NOT HAVE KNOWN ABOUT JESUS BEFORE THEY FOUND THEMSELVES
SHARING THE SAME FATE WITH HIM, BUT THEY COULD NOT HAVE FAILED TO LEARN MUCH ABOUT

HIM AS THEY WATCHED THE EVENTS UNFOLD BENEATH THEM.

THE THIEF THAT TRADITION CALLS DISMAS, AN EXPERT IN HATE AND DECEPTION, AND A REVOLUTIONARY, FOUND HIMSELF HANGING BESIDE A LIMITLESS LOVE THAT UTTERED NO CURSES, THAT DID NOT SWEAR AT HIS EXECUTORS AND THE JEERING CROWD, BUT THAT WAS ABLE TO SAY "FATHER, FORGIVE THEM FOR THEY KNOW NOT WHAT THEY DO." FOR DISMAS THE EXPERIENCE OF HEARING THESE WORDS AND SEEING THIS MAN WAS SHATTERING. NO LOVE PURELY HUMAN COULD HAVE SHAPED A PRAYER SUCH AS THAT, NO MARTYR OR RELIGIOUS ZEALOT COULD BE THAT LOVING. THE TITLE OVER JESUS' CROSS, THAT IN CYNICAL JEST READ "THIS IS JESUS THE KING OF THE JEWS," NO LONGER SEEMED TO THE THIEF A HOLLOW JOKE. HE WAS SURELY A KING—EVEN THOUGH ON SUCH A THRONE.

SO AS DISMAS HUNG THERE IN AGONY, SOMETHING HAPPENED IN THE HEART OF THIS HARD MAN. HE DID A LITTLE BIT OF NEGATIVE THINKING, REMEMBERING HIS LIFE OF EVIL AND CORRUPTION, HE SUDDENLY BECAME AWARE OF THE MORAL ORDER HE HAD VIOLATED. IN THESE ANXIOUS AND PAINFUL MOMENTS HE MADE A REAPPRAISAL OF HIS LIFE, AND AS HE LOOKED BACK HE SAW THE TRUE NATURE OF HIS LIFE OF CRIME. HE KNEW THAT HE HAD BROKEN GOD'S COMMANDMENTS, THAT HE DESERVED PUNISHMENT AND THAT HIS LIFE STOOD IN DEEP CONTRAST TO THE ONE ON THE MIDDLE CROSS.

AS BOTH OF THEM HUNG ON THEIR CROSSES IN UNSPEAKABLE TORTURE OF DEATH BY CRUCIFIXION, DISMAS TURNED TO JESUS AND SAID, "JESUS, REMEMBER ME WHEN YOU COME IN YOUR KINGLY"

POWER." AS A SIDE NOTE--THIS IS THE ONLY RECORDED INSTANCE IN THE BIBLE OF ANYONE CALLING OUR LORD BY HIS FIRST NAME. PERHAPS IT IS ONLY FITTING THAT HE SPOKE WITH SUCH FAMILIARITY AND INTIMACY. JESUS REPLIED TO HIM ACROSS A SEVERAL FOOT SPAN BETWEEN CROSSES, "TRULY, I SAY TO YOU, TODAY YOU WILL BE WITH ME IN PARADISE." IT WAS THE LAST INTERCHANGE OUR LORD HAD BEFORE HIS DEATH AND IT REMAINS AS THE MOST DRAMATIC OF HIS ENTIRE LIFE.

TO THIS MAN, WHO HAD DONE SOME LAST MINUTE NEGATIVE THINKING ABOUT HIMSELF THE HAND OF GOD REACHED DOWN, TO THE LOWER LEVELS OF HUMANITY, AND ELEVATED HIM TO LIFE EVER*
LASTING.

NOW NO ONE SHOULD WAIT FOR A DEATH BED REPENDENCE. IT HAS BEEN SAID THAT THE BIBLE RECORDS THIS ONE INSTANCE, THAT NO MAN NEED DESPAIR: BUT ONLY ONE THAT NO MAN MAY PRESUME.

YET PERHAPS THIS INCIDENT IS THE KEY TO THE CONVERSION OF THE MODERN WORLD. ONE THING STANDS OUT AS A REALITY--WE ALL DO WELL TO DO SOME NEGATIVE THINKING. IN THE FACE OF A DYING CHRIST, TO REAPPRAISE WHAT WE HAVE TO PRESENT, WHAT WE HAVE ACCOMPLISHED. (WHEN WE DO THIS WE TOO ARE INVITING THE PRESENCE OF GOD TO LIFT US TO A NEW LIFE.)

IN A TIME THAT HAS AS ITS PASS-WORD "THINK POSITIVELY" IT WILL BE HELPFUL IF WE TURN TO SOME OF THE EXPERIENCES IN THE BIBLE WHICH SHOW THE POWER OF NEGATIVE THINKING.

ONE INCIDENT WHICH QUICKLY COMES TO MIND IS THE FIRST ENCOUNTER AND CONVERSATION BETWEEN PETER AND JESUS. PETER WITH SOME OF HIS COMPANIONS HAD SPENT THE ENTIRE NIGHT LABORING WITH THEIR NETS IN THE SEA OF GALILEE AND HAD CAUGHT NOTHING. IT WAS A TIRED AND DISGUSTED FISHERMEN THAT JESUS TOLD TO TRY AGAIN, THIS TIME IN DEEPER WATER. IT IS AMUSING TO IMAGINE PETER'S RESENT AT THIS STRANGER'S ARROGANT PRESUMPTIOUS. ^{McG} ANY CRAFTSMAN WHO HAS EXPERIENCED THE WELL MEANT BUT UNINVITED ADVICE OF A BYSTANDER KNOWS HOW PETER MUST HAVE FELT. BUT THIS TIME THE BYSTANDER WAS RIGHT, AND IN ONE ATTEMPT PETER'S SUCCESS COMPENSATED FOR A WHOLE NIGHT OF FAILURE.

IT WAS IN THIS VERY CRUDE AND EARTHY WAY THAT PETER WAS PROMPTED TO NEGATIVE THINKING. A MOMENT OF TRUTH RESULTED AND PETER REALIZED THAT THIS WAS NOT JUST A CURIOUS ON* LOOKER AND HE CRIED OUT ("DEPART FROM ME, FOR I AM A SINFUL MAN, O LORD.") ALL THAT HAD HAPPENED ALL THAT HE HAD EVER DONE SEEMED SMALL BEFORE THIS MAN. WHEN FACED WITH THE CHRIST HIS THOUGHTS WERE SO NEGATIVE THAT HE COULD NOT BEAR IT. ("DEPART FROM ME O LORD.") BUT JESUS DID NOT DEPART, BUT STOOD BY PETER THROUGH THICK AND THIN. ALWAYS REVEALING TO THIS MAN WHO WAS SO CONSCIOUS OF HIS SIN, WHAT HE COULD BE. IT IS NEGATIVE THINKING THAT ALLOWS US TO SEE OURSELVES AS WE ARE, IN THE FACE OF DIVINE PER- FECTION: IT IS NEGATIVE THINKING THAT INVITES THE CHRIST TO REVEAL HIMSELF TO US.

THE POWER OF NEGATIVE THINKING IS CLEARLY PICTURED IN THE WORDS OF THE PRODIGAL WHEN HE RETURNED HOME "FATHER, I HAVE SINNED AGAINST HEAVEN AND BEFORE YOU. I AM NO LONGER WHO THY TO BE CALLED YOUR SON." THIS IS ABOUT AS NEGATIVE AS A PERSON CAN GET. BUT IT WAS HIS HUMILITY, HIS CONSCIOUSNESS OF HIS FAILURE AND HIS SELF AWARENESS THAT WAS THE GATEWAY TO A NEW LIFE. A LIFE WITH FAR MORE MEANING THAN ANY HE HAD EXPERIENCED BEFORE.

THE FIRST OF JESUS' BEATITUDES WHICH MATTHEW RECORDS IS "BLESSED ARE THE POOR IN SPIRIT, FOR THEIRS IS THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN." HERE JESUS DESCRIBES THE ROOT FROM WHICH TRUE BLESSEDNESS IS GROWN. THE BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO REMEMBER THEIR DEPENDENCE AND ENTER LIFE THROUGH THE DOOR OF HUMILITY. THE KINGDOM ALWAYS COMES TO THOSE WHO FEEL SOME SPIRITUAL NEED, NEVER TO THOSE WHO FEEL THAT THEY HAVE ARRIVED. THIS IS THE NEGATIVE THINKING THAT IS THE PRELUDE TO FRUITFUL LIVING.

I THINK WE HAVE DISCUSSED THIS POINT ENOUGH TO BE ABLE TO MAKE THE UNCONDITIONAL STATEMENT THAT THE BEGINNING OF CHRISTIAN EXPERIENCE IS NEVER IN POSITIVE, CONFIDENT SELF-ASSERTION, BUT IN VERY NEGATIVE SELF-RECOGNITION. BY ADMITTING HIS EMPTINESS OF SOUL, DIMAS CALLED ON CHRIST TO SAVE HIM. THIS MUST ALWAYS BE FIRST.

THE BIBLE TELLS US TO THINK ABOUT OURSELVES IN TWO WAYS FOR THIS IS THE WAY GOD THINKS OF US. IT TELLS US THAT WE ARE GOD'S CHILDREN, CREATED IN HIS IMAGE AS IN A LIKENESS OF A CHILD TO A FATHER. IT TELLS US THAT WE MATTER TO GOD AND ARE OF

INFINITE WORTH TO HIM. BUT THE BIBLE ALSO TELLS US THAT WE ARE OFTEN GOD'S DISOBEDIENT CHILDREN, VERY FAR FROM HIS IMAGE IN US.

WHEN A MAN THINKS OF HIMSELF AS BEING SATISFACTORY AND IN NO NEED OF CHANGE, HE LETS LOOSE THE PRIDEFUL ELEMENTS IN HIMSELF WHICH CAN DESTROY HIM. / WHEN A MAN GETS TO A PLACE WHERE HE SEES THAT HE NEEDS CHANGING, WHEN HE DISCOVERS SOME ASPECT OF CHRIST WHICH HUMBLER HIM, WHICH FILLS HIM WITH SELF DISGUST HE IS THEN READY TO CALL ON ACCEPT THE FORGIVING PRESENCE OF GOD. SELF DISGUST IS THE BEGINNING OF CONVERSION / IT MARKS THE DEATH OF PRIDE.

THERE IS NOT ONE OF US HERE, OR ANYWHERE, THAT CAN CLAIM PERFECTION. EACH ONE OF US HARBOURS A CERTAIN RESENT OR DISLIKE FOR ANOTHER: WE ARE ALL INTOLERANT TO A DEGREE. EVERY SINGLE ONE OF US IS PROUD AND SELF-CENTERED. IF WE TRY WE CAN EVEN REMEMBER THINGS WE'VE DONE TODAY THAT WERE NOT RIGHT, SPOKEN SHARPLY TO HUSBAND OR WIFE, BEEN A LITTLE IRRITABLE WITH OUR CHILDREN, OR UNKNOWINGLY BEEN SNOBBISH TO A CLERK OR PAPER BOY. BRIEFLY AND SIMPLY WE ARE NOT PERFECT, NOONE IS.

HOWEVER IT IS NOT THIS BARRAGE OF TRIVIALITY THAT THE CHRISTIAN MEANS BY SIN. SIN ^{IS} RATHER THE DENIAL OF THESE, THE REFUSAL TO ADMIT THAT WE ARE CONSTANTLY MAKING THESE LITTLE MISTAKES. SIN, (IN OTHER WORDS,) IS IMPLY THE DENIAL THAT WE ARE SINNERS. IF ~~THAT~~ THIS IS OUR ATTITUDE THERE IS NO ROOM FOR THE CHRIST IN OUR LIVES.

IT WAS BY ADMITTING THE EMPTINESS OF HIS SOUL THAT THE THIEF FOUND NEW LIFE. THE SAME IS IMPORTANT FOR US. WHEN A MAN'S FEVER CLIMBS TO A POINT OF DELIRIOUSNESS, HE UNDERSTANDS HIS SICKNESS LESS AND LESS. HE MAY EVEN THINK HIMSELF SO HEALTHY HE WANTS TO GO TO WORK. WE NEVER KNOW WE HAVE BEEN ASLEEP UNTIL WE AWAKE. WHEN, THEREFOR, WE REACH A POINT WHEN WE CEASE PRaising OURSELVES AND BASKING IN OUR OWN GOODNESS AND BEGIN TO SAY TO OURSELVES (AND TO GOD) THAT WE ARE SINNERS, WE ARE THEN, AND ONLY THEN, ON THE PATHWAY TO A NEW LIFE. SO LONG AS WE THINK WE ARE GOOD, OR EVEN GOOD ENOUGH, WE WILL NEVER FIND GOD AND HIS NEW CREATION.

{ THE BEGINNING OF THE CHRISTIAN EXPERIENCE IS NOT IN CONFIDENT SELF ASSERTION BUT IN VERY NEGATIVE SELF RECOGNITION.

OUT OF SUCH A SPIRIT OF SELF RECOGNITION COMES THE PROMISE OF CHRIST'S PRESENCE. WHEN THE THIEF CALLED OUT "JESUS, REMEMBER ME", ETERNAL LOVE, EVEN THOUGH INCARNATE IN A BODY TORTURED AND DYING, RESPONDED AND SAID ("TODAY YOU WILL BE WITH ME IN PARADISE."). IN THIS, GOD SHOWS THAT WE MAY BECOME GREAT NOT BECAUSE OF WHAT WE ARE OR DO, BUT BECAUSE OF WHAT HE GIVES.

WE CANNOT BELIEVE THAT THIS PENITENT SOUL HAD ANYTHING LESS THAN A DEEP SENSE OF DELIVERANCE. ~~HE~~ IN ANSWER TO THE PRAYER OF FAITH AND PENITENCE JESUS SPOKE THE FORGIVENESS OF GOD. A WHOLE LIFE OF CRIME AND CORRUPTION WAS COVERED IN ONE WORD OF PARDON. A COMPLETE RELATIONSHIP WAS MADE WITH JESUS IN A MINUTE OF

NEGATIVE THINKING AND THE THIEF DIED BE SIDE AND WITH HIS LORD. FOR HIM THE TASK WAS OVER, NOT ONLY BECAUSE HE WAS DYING BUT BECAUSE NOW HE HAD NEW LIFE. HE WAS BEGINNING AGAIN WITH NO CHAINS, NO PRISON BARS BUT WITH A FREE HEART AND THE SPACES OF ETERNITY BEFORE HIM.

IF GOD'S TENDER MERCY EXTENDED TO THIS THIEF WE CAN BE SURE THAT IT EXTENDS TO US ALSO. THE TRUTH OF THE GOSPEL IS THAT GOD LOVES AND CARES FOR EVERY MAN, WOMAN AND CHILD AND LONGS FOR US TO EXPRESS OUR NEED FOR HIM. A JESUS, WHO WILL FROM THE CROSS LOVE DIMAS, MEANS A GOD WHO CARES FOR EVERYONE. WE KNOW THAT GOD IS WAITING FOR A SIGN FROM THOSE OF US WHO HAVE FAILED, ~~HE IS WAITING FOR US TO THINK NEGATIVELY~~ AND TO CALL OUT, JESUS, REMEMBER ME.

ACTUALLY TWO WORDS WERE SPOKEN TO JESUS THAT DAY BY THOSE WHO WERE CRUCIFIED WITH HIM. THE THIEF ADDED TO THE TAUNTING INSULTS OF THE CROWD BY SAYING "ARE YOU NOT THE CHRIST? SAVE YOURSELF AND US" PERHAPS HE HOPED ONLY TO RELIEVE HIS OWN TORTURE BY HEAPING RIDICULE ON THE ONE WHO WAS A VICTIM WITH HIM. ANYWAY, HE DIED, ADDING TO HIS LIFE OF EVIL THE GRAVE MISTAKE OF MOCKING GOD IN THIS CRUCIAL HOUR.

BUT THE OTHER LOOKED TO JESUS IN FAITH AND REPENTANCE: AND RECEIVED FROM HIM THE

PROMISE OF ETERNAL LIFE. DISMAS HAD FOLLOWED THE WRONG ROAD SIGNS ALL HIS LIFE AND THESE SUDDENLY, ON THE CROSS, HE SAW THE RIGHT SIGN AND FOLLOWED IT. IT IS SAD THAT HE FOUND THE WAY TO LIFE SO NEAR TO HIS DEATH. HOW SAD IT IS TO SEE SOMEONE SPEND ALL OF HIS DAYS STRIVING TO REALIZE AN AMBITION OR GOAL, AND WHEN HE REACHES IT TO FIND THAT THERE IS NOTHING THERE. LATE IN THE DAY HE MUST PICK UP HIS BAGGAGE AND LOOK FOR ANOTHER ROAD.

* GOD LEANS OUT OF HIS IMMENSITY AND, IN JESUS CHRIST, ASKS US TO DO SOME NEGATIVE THINKING. HE ASKS FOR A RESPONSE THAT RECOGNIZES HOW EMPTY WE ARE, A RESPONSE THAT KNOWS THE MEANINGLESSNESS OF PRIDE.

AS WE MOVE CLOSER TO ^{EASTER} ~~LET~~ LET US, LIKE DISMAS, LOOK INTO THE ^{FACE} ~~FACE~~ OF A DYING LORD, AND CRY WITH HIM " JESUS REMEMBER ME. "

AMEN.